

# Currie's Pretence

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# A Recap

**Currie-ng on**

# Positive Irony is Like a Good Steak

Rare, difficult to pull off, and quite enjoyable for all parties involved (except the cow).

Examples: “What an egotist you are, always giving yourself the satisfaction of doing things for other people.” (Grice)

To a friend wearing a new, beautiful dress: “You look absolutely hideous tonight”.

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*So positive irony is not like positive commentary; commenting positively on something is not doing more than commenting, it is just making a certain kind of comment, and we would expect to see plenty of positive and negative commentary. Positive irony, on the other hand, is irony plus something else, and the something else is not easy to bring off.*

Why should irony be based on the adoption of a *defective* standpoint?

Alternatively: “If, necessarily, irony is a practice of pretending to adopt a defective outlook, why isn’t there a symmetrical practice, whatever we might choose to call it, of pretending to adopt a superior outlook?”

Answer: because it doesn’t make sense. If we *knew* of a superior outlook, then we would want to adopt it, not pretend-adopt it.

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Answer: because it doesn’t make sense. If we *knew* of a superior outlook, then we would want to adopt it, not pretend-adopt it.

*My addition: We do occasionally pretend to adopt superior perspectives, knowing they are superior to our own; but this ends up being an ironic defense of ourselves, by painting the superior outlook as if it was inferior.*

# The Content of Pretence



## Two Criticisms

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Consider:

*Jones, this murderer, this thief, this crook, is indeed an honourable fellow.*

No speaker could say this seriously, no audience could assent to it. But we can *pretend* that there are such a speaker or audience.

# The Scope of Pretending

*“Acts of pretence sometimes require from us a sophisticated imaginative response: one which picks and chooses between elements of the performance, and which sometimes adds further elements which are merely implied by the performance, rather than being explicit in it.”*

*“Any theory of irony based on pretence should acknowledge the possibility of very complex and hard-to-regiment relations between the totality of the performance and what constitutes the content of the pretence.”*

# The Elaboration of Pretence

*Peter:* It's a lovely day for a picnic.  
[They go on a picnic and it's sunny.]

*Mary:* It's a lovely day for a picnic,  
indeed.

*Peter:* It's a lovely day for a picnic.  
[They go on a picnic and it rains.]

*Mary:* It's a lovely day for a picnic,  
indeed.

Sperber and Wilson: the only difference is in the expressed attitudes.

Currie: The second case begins a play-like scenario which can be “Yes, and”-ed by Peter

# Empirical Evidence

Happé's scenario:

*David fails to understand the instructions to crack eggs before putting them in the bowl.*

*His mother says: 'Your head is made out of wood!'*

*His father says: 'What a clever boy you are!'*

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For Sperber and Wilson: irony being echoic, we need to identify the echoed assertion, and that requires second-order mind-reading skills—unlike metaphor.

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Currie thinks Happé's results are controversial, but even if we accept them, they are compatible with pretence theory.

Understanding pretence *in general* may or may not require second-order mind-reading skills, but *it doesn't matter*: we only care about the special case of pretending to make an assertion.

To understand David's father's irony, we need to understand that

*David's father pretends that [he thinks that {David is clever}]*

# Other Kinds of Irony

Some cases of so-called “irony” are not entirely covered by Currie’s theory, but he thinks his account can still shed some light.

These are

**Dramatic Irony · Situational Irony · Suppressed Irony**

# Dramatic Irony

*‘Dramatic irony’ [is] the fictional representation of the kind of contrast between perspectives that one pretends to be the victim of when one speaks ironically.*

Examples: Romeo takes his life believing that Juliet is dead, we the audience know that this is not the case; Electra mourns over the ashes she thinks are those of Orestes. Sitcoms employ a “cringe factor”.

# Situational Irony

Currie thinks this is a “bloated category”, and that we think many non-ironic situations are ironic.

We can restrict situational irony to some cases in which it definitely applies: those cases which, *if our lives were a play or movie*, would be analyzed as dramatic irony.

Examples: It's ironic to have a heated argument about being late for a train, only to get to the station and find that it's been canceled/delayed. It's ironic to rob a bank the day after they emptied the vault.

# Suppressed Irony

*Not really* irony—“an exploitation of the mechanisms by which irony operates.”

First we need to understand nested fiction.

*Emma's reply to Mr Knightly: 'To be sure—our discordancies must always arise from my being in the wrong.' is **genuinely ironic**.*

But irony is pretence, so it generates a fiction, so

*It is fictional (in Emma) that {Emma's utterance makes it fictional (in her game of pretence) that [she, Emma, seriously asserts that her disputes with Mr Knightly always arise from her being in the wrong]}.*

# Suppressed Irony

We then sometimes get suppressed irony when we remove the second *fiction* operator.

For example:

*Sonja: 'And before Seretski, Aleksei, and before Aleksei, Alegorian, and before Alegorian, Asimov, and...'*

*Boris: 'How many lovers do you have?' Sonja: 'In the mid-town area?' (Love and Death)*

The remarks are funny because they are *not* ironic.

# Limited Ambition

Pretence theory cannot differentiate well between irony and sarcasm.

For Curry, following Sperber and Wilson, not a problem: “the fine distinctions within the class of [pretend utterances] pale into insignificance beside the big distinction—that between [pretend] and [non-pretend] utterances”

We are seeking a *centre of gravity* for irony.

For special, weird, edge-cases, it suffices to give an account of their relation, or parentage, to the clear-cut cases at the center of gravity.

*What a theory of irony must do is show that it has the resources to characterize, in intuitively acceptable ways, the place where irony's centre of gravity is, and to measure, again in intuitively acceptable ways, the distances from there to other places on the map.*

# Questions

What are the differences between pretence theory and echoic theory?

Which one do you agree with? — Does pretence theory have any real advantages over echoic theory?